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ABSTRACT

This guide first points out the difficulty and the lack of reliability involved in using tests to evaluate the abilities of children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Suggestions are then given for using existing evaluation techniques to test the English language proficiency of children at kindergarten level. The following are the main points emphasized: (1) keep tests short, (2) keep them simple, (3) keep them pleasant, (4) test in small groups, and (5) tape record all speech samples. Suggestions for testing the recognition of contrastive sounds, grammatical structures, and sound production in English conclude the guide. (TL)

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PRESCHOOL EDUCATION SERIES: English as a Second Language in Kindergarten -- Testing Young Children

Evaluation is one of the most important (and most often ignored) components in any educational program. It is necessary for us to know what concepts and skills a child brings to school if we are to build upon that foundation. We also need to evaluate his achievement during the year in order to provide guidelines for the next teacher and to evaluate the relative effectiveness of our teaching techniques and instructional materials.

There are no completely appropriate evaluation measures for young children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. This does not mean that we should not attempt to evaluate their positive capabilities and their progress, but it does mean that we should draw only tentative conclusions from such test results and remain sensitive to other indications of ability or to breakdowns in communication.

This question of appropriateness is, in more technical terms, a question of the validity of tests for these children. Do the tests really measure what they are intended to measure? A language test that calls for the repetition of long sentences is introducing a heavy IQ or memory factor; reading readiness tests that require the identification of objects (e.g., toboggan and fire escape) are of questionable value, and those that test for the recognition of rhymes and homophones may not be appropriate for any given dialect area. No verbal measure of intelligence is reliable with children who have linguistically different backgrounds.

Before offering positive suggestions for using existing evaluation techniques, one more hazard must be emphasized. It is important not to conclude that a child does not control any language just because he does not talk at the beginning of school. He may be shy, or intimidated by a strange adult, or just choose not to for the time being. Then the verbal context is an artificial testing situation in which a child is asked a question by an adult who obviously already knows the answer, there is little reason to expect a natural response, and no ratings of verbal fluency can reliably be based on such interview situations.

Formal language tests should include measurement of both the child's ability to understand and to produce the structures of English -- its sound system, common grammatical elements, and a basic vocabulary. When testing young children:

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1. Keep it short. Because testing time is valuable, it is better to test only those aspects of the language which are likely to be a problem. These items may be predicted in large part from a contrastive analysis of the child's language system and standard English. For instance, a Spanish-speaking child need not be tested for his ability to hear and produce m because it is common to both languages; his ability to contrast ch and sh needs to be tested, however, because the contrast does not exist in Spanish and is likely to be a problem in learning English.
2. Keep it simple. Once a test extends beyond the basic vocabulary which is common to children of the same age who speak English natively, it is more a test of superior intelligence than of language mastery. Any test used with young children should require little ability to follow directions, and few such skills as marking pictures or following items in sequence. If the test contains such directions as "draw a circle around ____" or "make an X on ____", teach the directions ahead of time without using items on the test.
3. Keep it pleasant. It is probably better for the teacher or aide to test young children than to have tests administered by a stranger. Tests need to be interesting, and attractive pictures are often used. Care should be taken that such pictures are not ambiguous. Above all, the atmosphere of the classroom should be relaxed and happy.
4. Test in small groups. Production tests must be given individually unless there is sophisticated and expensive equipment for multiple recording, but paper-and-pencil tests of recognition can be given to groups of eight to ten. (More may be tested at once if there is an assistant present for every ten children.) It is necessary to check constantly to see if every child is in the right place, and even to see if all the test booklets are right side up. One teacher who tries to supervise twenty or thirty children will lose the attention of the class.
5. Tape record all speech samples. This will allow the teacher to compare the child's pronunciation at a later time and to check on questionable items without asking the child to repeat, to record errors without taking undue time. These tapes will also provide valuable data for later linguistic analysis.

The kind of item which tests for the recognition of contrastive sounds in English may be a pair of pictures whose labels differ only in the one sound being tested, such as ship and sheep or vase and base. The children are asked to mark (or put their finger on) the sheep, the vase, and one picture of each pair being tested. Children may be tested individually by saying pairs of words (or having them prerecorded) and having the child say if each pair of words is "the same" or "different". These might include: share:chair (different); bear:bear (the same); they:day (different).

Grammatical structures are often difficult to illustrate, but pictures can be used in pairs to test recognition of such items as the boy who is going

to jump vs. the boy who is jumping; the boy who has a cold vs. the boy who is cold; or the dog which is going to eat vs. the dog which has eaten. An understanding of verbs and prepositions can be tested by similar pairs of pictures (the ball that is in the box vs. the ball that is on the box) or by giving individual children directions which have been carefully prepared to include the desired structures.

A child's ability to produce the sounds of English and a basic vocabulary can be tested in part by asking children to name pictures or objects. Since children will need to understand and produce words in normal linguistic contexts, responses to appropriate questions or analyses of free speech are also needed. Natural speech samples can only be elicited in natural communicative contexts, however, and listening to the children talk to each other in the course of work and play will provide far more reliable information on their fluency and ability to express themselves than any formal techniques.

The elements of testing mentioned above are all essential to prepare even a barely adequate profile of a child's oral language ability. If the child speaks a language other than English, an adequate profile must also include his proficiency in that language. For practical reasons, such as determining eligibility for state-supported kindergartens which give priority to non-English-speaking children, a "first aid" measure may be needed that will provide some immediate information. A fast preliminary screening of each child's ability to produce the sounds of English can be obtained by asking him to count to ten and name the crayons in a crayon box. The child who says tree for three, fife for five, and vet for red is showing that he may need help hearing and pronouncing the distinctive sounds of English. On the other hand, the kindergarten child who says wed for red is using immature pronunciation which he will probably outgrow without any special instruction.

It should again be emphasized that such testing procedures cannot reliably show what a child does not know. They do yield positive information about what language we can be sure he has already mastered.

A great deal of work remains to be done on the construction of tests for children from linguistically different backgrounds. Experienced and knowledgeable teachers can be of invaluable assistance to this development with their willingness to try new testing procedures, and with their critical evaluation of the tests themselves. Formal evaluation measures are both necessary and desirable, but they are never an end in themselves. They can help identify the strengths and experiences of a child upon which further instruction can be built; they can pinpoint possible weak points which may interfere with learning; and they can assist existing and innovative programs in assessing, improving, and refining instructional techniques and materials.